The Future of Work: Compulsory by Martha Wells

It's not like I haven't thought about killing the humans since I hacked my governor module. But then I started exploring the company servers and discovered hundreds of hours of downloadable entertainment media, and I figured, what's the hurry? I can always kill the humans after the next series ends.

Even the humans think about killing the humans, especially here. I hate mines, and mining, and humans who work in mining, and of all the stupid mines I can remember, I hate this stupid mine the most. But the humans hate it more. My risk-assessment module predicts a 53 percent chance of a human-on-human massacre before the end of the contract.

"Knobface," Elane said to Asa. "You're not the supervisor."

Maybe that percentage should have been higher, the way the three humans on the observation platform were fighting about the flow rate. Not that I cared. I was in the entertainment feed, watching episode 44 of *The Rise and Fall of Sanctuary Moon* and monitoring ambient audio for keywords in the unlikely event that a human said something important.

"Those things make my insides creep." That was Sekai, looking at me. Nobody likes SecUnits. Even I don't like us. We're part-human, part-bot constructs, and we make everybody nervous and uncomfortable.

I didn't react. I'm in full armor, and I keep my visor opaque. Also, 98 percent of my attention was on the episode I was watching: The colony solicitor's bodyguard and best friend had just been crushed under debris while trying to save a transport mech trapped in a crash. Were they really going to kill her off? That sucked.

I didn't realize anything had happened on the platform until I heard a strangled yell. I ran back my video: Asa had turned abruptly and accidentally bumped into Sekai, knocking her off the platform.

Great. I paused the episode and checked the monitoring drone down in the shaft. I couldn't get a visual, but I tracked the power signature of Sekai's suit. She bounced off the stabilizer wall (ouch) and hit a blade on the extractor housing. Gravity was lighter in the shaft, and there was a chance that the impacts hadn't—yeah, she was moving. I isolated her comm signal and heard harsh, frightened breathing. She had 90 seconds before that blade moved and dumped her down to be incinerated in the collectors.

You would think dealing with this would be my job. But no, my job is: 1) to prevent the workers from stealing company property, everything from tools to disposable napkins from the mess hall; 2) to prevent the workers from injuring and/or killing management, no matter how tempting the prospect might be; and 3) to prevent the workers from intentionally harming one another in ways that might diminish productivity. So HubSystem's response to my alert was to tell me to stay in position.

The mine was run by cheap, venal bastards, so the nearest safety bot was 200 meters above us. HubSystem ordered me to stay in position; SafetyResponder28 was incoming. It would arrive just in time to retrieve the smoldering lump formerly known as Sekai.

Asa, realizing what he'd done, was making a noise that did uncomfortable things to the organic parts in my head. Elane was sobbing. I could have ignored them and gone back to the episode, but I liked the colony solicitor's bodyguard and I didn't want her to be dead. Sekai, a human I was technically responsible for, would be dead soon too.

With my governor module inert, I sometimes do things and I'm not entirely sure why. (Apparently getting free will after having 93 percent of your behavior controlled for your entire existence will do weird things to your impulse control.) Without thinking about it, I stepped off the edge of the platform.

As I fell down the shaft, I kicked the stabilizer wall to push myself into the lighter gravity well. I landed on the housing above Sekai, just as HubSystem sent a command to my governor module that should have flash-fried my inorganic parts and soft human bits. Ha.

Sekai looked up at me, eyes wide. Her helmet had cracked (that's what cut-rate safety equipment gets you) and her face was streaked with tears. I initiated a secure audio link between my armor and her suit, hooked one hand around the edge of the housing, and reached down. "We have 45 seconds to get out of here before we both die," I said.

She gasped and shoved upward to grab my arm. As I pulled her against my chest, the blade cycled and dropped. A blast of heat and radiation washed over us. Sekai made an "eep" noise. I wanted to make an "eep" noise too, but I was busy. I said, "Just hook your harness to me."

She fumbled the clips into place and got them fastened. Now I was free to focus on phase 2 of this stupid plan. I'd hacked HubSystem when I was first shipped here. Now I needed to make it forget what it had just seen. No—I needed to make this look like HubSystem's idea.

By the time I'd climbed the shaft and slung us both up onto the platform, HubSystem was convinced that it had ordered me to rescue Sekai. I set her on her feet, filtering out the crying on the comm, and pulled up the management feed that I wasn't supposed to have access to. Good: The supervisors were puzzled that HubSystem had directed a SecUnit to save a worker, but figured it was a productivity issue. Sekai and the others would be hit with fines for almost clogging the collectors with her burning body, but it was better than being dead. I guess.

Elane tried to pull Sekai away, but she turned back and stumbled toward me. "Thank you," she said. It was like she could see me through my visor, which was a terrifying enough thought that my performance reliability dropped 3 percent.

Asa took her arm gently. "They can't talk," he told her.

She shook her head as her friends steered her toward the access bridge. "No, it talked. I heard it."

Back at my guard station, I started the episode again. Maybe somebody would save the colony solicitor's bodyguard too.